Brown *vs.* The Board of Education

One of the most important decisions of the Civil Rights Movement

On May 17, 1954, in the case *of Brown* v. *the Board of Education of Topeka*, the U.S. Supreme Court ended federally sanctioned racial segregation in the public schools by ruling unanimously that "separate educational facilities are inherently unequal." A groundbreaking case, *Brown* not only overturned the precedent of Plessy v. Ferguson (1896), which had declared "separate but equal facilities" constitutional, but also provided the legal foundation of the Civil Rights Movement of the 1960s. Although widely perceived as a revolutionary decision, Brown was in fact the culmination of changes both in the Court and in the strategies of the Civil Rights Movement.

The Supreme Court had become more liberal in the years since it decided *Plessy*, largely due to appointments by Democratic Presidents Franklin D. Roosevelt and Harry S. Truman. Though still all-white, the Court had issued decisions in the 1930s and 1940s that rendered racial separation illegal in certain situations.

Now consolidated under the name *Brown* v. *Board of Education*, the five cases came before the Supreme Court in December, 1952. The lead attorney on the case, Thurgood Marshall, and his colleagues wrote that states had no valid reason to impose segregation, that racial separation — no matter how equal the facilities — caused psychological damage to black children, and that "restrictions or distinctions based upon race or color" violated the equal protection clause of the Fourteenth Amendment.

The opinion, written by Warren and read on May 17, 1954, was short and straightforward. It echoed Marshall's expert witnesses, stating that for African American schoolchildren, segregation "generates a feeling of inferiority as to their status in the community that may affect their hearts and minds in a way unlikely to ever be undone." The decision went on to say that segregation had no valid purpose, was imposed to give blacks lower status, and was therefore unconstitutional based on the Fourteenth Amendment.

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